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SUBJECT: BENIN REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION WEEK 2009

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¶1. SUMMARY: To mark the celebration of the International Education Week November 16-20, Cotonou Public Affairs Section organized a series of activities including communications on exchange programs, experience sharing by Fulbright and Humphrey alumni, a DVC on "Studying in the U.S" and the showing of the films "The Great Debaters" and "Akeelah and the Bee." END SUMMARY.

¶2. PROGRAM JUSTIFICATION/OBJECTIVES: PAS Cotonou promoted International Education Week (IEW) 2009 by implementing a series of activities designed to highlight the importance and impact of international exchange programs, the educational opportunities available to foreign students in the United States and the advantages of studying in the United States, student life at U.S. Universities, the importance of learning English and to encourage the youth to have a vision in order to plan for a better future.

¶3. MPP UMBRELLA THEMES AND AUDIENCE REACHED: Promoting Education, and Investing in People. At least 750 participants, including university officials, the Deputy Mayor of Parakou, government officials from the District of Parakou, lecturers, journalists, high school and university students, members of English Clubs, high school teachers, Peace Corps volunteers and other interested guests took part in these programs. The week-long programs held across the country were covered by all major media outlets including TV, radio and print media. Estimated audience reached: 3.5 million. The national Radio station, that covers the entire country, broadcast the event in French, with translations in 18 major local languages.

¶4. ACTIVITIES/IMPACT/RESULT: Ambassador Knight's originally scheduled TV interview to launch the IEW was unexpectedly cancelled by the TV station at the last minute. As a follow-up to launch the week's activities, on November 16, PAO Rhonda Watson, IRO Myra Brown, and IRC Director Bienvenu Akodigna organized a series of events at the University of Parakou, located 400 km north of Cotonou. In her remarks during the opening ceremony, the PAO explained the importance of education in empowering people and showed how an international dimension can increase opportunities and open doors for young people. She encouraged the audience to learn English and to take advantage of USG exchange programs to complete their education and increase their potential to achieve personal and national development goals.

¶5. This program also gave the Public Affairs Section (PAS) the opportunity to present books and materials to the American Corner and renew the Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Parakou. Materials donated included ARS Nouveaux Horizons Publications, computers and accessories.

¶6. IRO Myra Brown highlighted the important role that an American Corner located in a university can play in serving as a hub of activity and intellectual enlightenment. She explained that an American Corner can play a key role in enhancing lecturers' and students' literacy and improving their knowledge of American values and culture, thus promoting mutual understanding.

¶7. The launch ceremony ended with the film "The Great Debaters." The projection might have been sabotaged by technical difficulties, but fortunately there was a Peace Corps Volunteer in the audience with the right skills to solve the problem. Students stayed late to watch the film and learned how hard work and persistence will bring rewards. Drawing from lessons learned by the debaters from Wiley College, a University of Parakou student commented that the lesson he learned from the film is that "Failure is only a temporary change in direction to set you straight for your next success."

¶8. Meanwhile, in Cotonou, Cultural Affairs Assistant Taibatou Osseni and Program Support Assistant Marie Noel Maffon gave presentations at the National College of Administration and Magistrates at the University of Abomey-Calavi and at the National College of Applied Economics and Management (ENEAM). They spoke about the objectives and importance of the International Education Week and the services offered by the American Cultural Center, including the exchange opportunities. They showed a PowerPoint presentation entitled, "If you want to study in the U.S..." A book fair was also organized on the campus of Abomey-Calavi where the IRC section displayed ARS Nouveaux Horizons Publications. Unfortunately, the teachers at the University of Abomey-Calavi were striking for better working conditions and increased allowances, and the students were striking against the establishment of an online registration process. The few students who wanted to attend the conference had been persuaded by the President of students' association not to attend the event. The conference in Abomey-Calavi only attracted 20 students who were courageous enough to participate. At least 100 students attended the event at ENEAM, however.

¶9. On November 17, IRO Myra Brown conducted a training session in Parakou on the topic: "How to Do Very Intelligent and Effective Internet Searches." This workshop, which attracted over 60 students, was an opportunity to introduce participants to wikis, blogs, and video sharing websites such as YouTube. The IRO also talked about the dangers of plagiarism and gave participants an assignment to choose a research topic that they could cover within the time frame and resources available. Students participated with enthusiasm in the session and some of them shared their work with the audience.

¶10. The Cultural Affairs Assistant and the Program Support Assistant visited the Institute of Mathematics and Physics in the city of Dangbo, located 15 km from Porto-Novo. Thirty students attended the event where the presentation emphasized the importance of learning English for students of science and technology. At the Teachers' Training College in Porto-Novo the audience of 100 was made up of high school and university students, members of English clubs, faculty members and alumni. The program focused on the need for the high school students to begin planning for their future as early as possible. The presenters also explained the opportunities offered by the Fulbright exchange program. Both institutions expressed their willingness to collaborate with the American Cultural Center.

¶11. On November 18, the Cultural Affairs Assistant held a conference at the Regional Institute of Engineering Industry and Biotechnology, a private institution, where Adam Pinto, a Humphrey alumnus who studied Urban Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, talked about his experience as a Humphrey fellow. According to Pinto, an international education maximizes professional and social opportunities, improves English skills, and develops leadership and networking skills.

¶12. PAS Cotonou also organized the showing of the film "Akeelah and the Bee" at the largest high school in Come, a village located 63 km away from Cotonou. PAS also donated books to the high school library. Because promoting girls' education is a high priority of the U.S. Mission, PAS initiated the showing of this film to underscore the importance of sending all children, especially girls, to school. Thus, one of the aims of this program was to highlight the importance of education, encourage girls to go to school and teach them that there are no barriers to their educational success if they will only study and persevere. As the International Education Week is also an opportunity to develop a broader understanding of world cultures and languages, another objective of this program was to promote the study of English.

¶13. The reaction of the students to the movie was overwhelmingly positive. The director of the high school seized this opportunity to remind his students that working hard is a key to success. The English teachers expressed their interest in having more film showings as they not only entertain the students but also educate.

¶14. On November 19, the PAS team visited the private institution "Projet Cerco" and the College of Commerce and Management "HECM" to explain academic exchange opportunities to the students and teachers. The importance of learning English was emphasized in a speech delivered by Herve Djengue, a Fulbright Alumnus who studied Finance at Brandeis University. Two hundred students and faculty members attended the event.

¶15. Based on the number and intensity of questions and audience contributions, the programs were well received and successful. Handouts marketing our exchange programs and IRC services encouraged potential candidates to apply for the Fulbright Program and private and public academic institutions to apply for and request Fulbright Specialists.

¶16. PAS received many requests from the various institutions for additional programs and resources, especially to help improve the teaching of English, and didactic materiel for libraries, and research training for the students.

¶17. To wrap up the IEW activities, on November 23 PAS hosted an ARS-offered DVC program on the topic "Studying in the U.S..." The program attracted 75 University and high school students eager to learn about the requirements to study in the United States, the U.S. educational system, student life in the United States, scholarship opportunities for foreign students and other key information that they would never have been able to gather if they had not attended this session. The DVC Moderator presented an overview of studying in the United States, and explained he reasons why the United States attracts so many foreign students every year. Thereafter, three University students studying in the United States talked about their experience and other useful information related to studying in the United States.

¶18. Beninese DVC participants posed questions about how to prepare for the TOEFL test, how to do research for a PhD, the availability of humanitarian assistance to foreign students in the United States, campus life, the difference between public and private universities, multiple enrollments, problems of accommodation for foreign students, differences between the U.S. and the French educational systems, Civil engineering studies, violence on U.S. campuses, the equivalency between U.S. and French Degrees.

¶19. During the informal discussion following the DVC program, participants said they were delighted to have been given the opportunity to attend this productive and highly captivating session.

¶20. NON-USG SOURCES OF IN-COUNTRY FUNDING/IN KIND SUPPORT:
The willingness of the private academic institutions we visited to encourage and mobilize students to attend the sessions, was instrumental and determining to the overwhelming success of this activity even though students and teachers were on strike at the University of Abomey Calavi. The participation of the Fulbright alumni, Hilaire Comlanvi, Adam Pinto, Kpadonou Hounsa Gabriel, and Herve Djengue brought vivid first-hand accounts to the events.

¶21. QUALITY OF USG SUPPORT: Excellent. Kudos to ARS for recruiting such motivated university students to share their experiences with our guests. Post also appreciated ARS' collaboration by sending the Nouveaux Horizons Publication for the book fair and offering the opportunity of a DVC on "Studying in the U.S. and IIP for making available materials and e-journals on International Education Advantages, Guide to Higher learning Campus Connection and Choosing a career. The electronic copies of these e-journals were sent to interested guests and students. Finally, Kudos to the Peace Corps Volunteer who rescued the film showing in Parakou.

KNIGHT